



## Ascension Witness to Christ

**(I Acts 18:1-8; Psalm 97-98; John 16: 16-20)**

Although for practical reasons, the bishops have wisely or unwisely shifted Ascension Thursday to Sunday, today is Ascension Thursday: the day on which we reflect on the fact that Jesus has withdrawn his more obvious presence from the disciples he sent out to evangelize a hostile world. For a time, he needed to impress upon them the fact of the resurrection, but he would not remain down through history walking among them as he did for that brief period: they were not on their own, but they would need to take more direct responsibility for the fulfilment of their mission.

The Ascension was an act of trust: the master made his disciples stewards of the mysteries of faith, and stewards of the mission, until he came again. He promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit, a promise fulfilled at Pentecost, and he promised to be with them even to the end of time, but he entrusted them with their mission in a way that required of them a deep personal engagement and an acceptance of responsibility and accountability. He treated them, as he treats us, as adults. The Ascension is the feast of our coming of age.

So here we are, empowered and not abandoned, in the midst of a hostile world, the same hostile world into which he came. We will always encounter our Lord directly and personally, by faith and God's grace, in Word and Sacrament, and the Holy Spirit is with us to give us life and courage, and to guide us through this world on our way home to the heavenly Father, but through his ascension Our Lord Jesus has entrusted to us the mission of bringing light into darkness, and love into a world of brutal violence and, in our country, especially also of subtle violence.

We recall the mission entrusted to us especially on this Ascension day as we gather in the capital of our country to witness to the sanctity of human life through this yearly pilgrimage which is the March for Life. This is not a political rally. This is not a publicity exercise. This is a pilgrimage, and also a journey into darkness to bring to that place the loving light of Christ. For we are not in a Lourdes or Fatima where the end point of the pilgrimage is a shrine. In this place judicial and legislative decisions are made which entrench in our nation a regime of death, with dire consequences probably not even foreseen by those who made and make the decisions.

So this is a time of pilgrimage, holy pilgrimage, and the readings today speak to us of the way in which we should conduct ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus, Christ the King, risen in glory and ascended to the right hand of the Father. We should keep in mind always what was said in ancient times by a Christian reporting the martyrdom of a witness to Christ when the Roman Empire seemed omnipotent: "He died in the third year of the Emperor X (I forget his name), but in the reign of Jesus Christ."

A first lesson is that we need to engage this world which God so loved that he sent into it his beloved Son. We should read and reread, always, the Acts of the Apostles. There we find the apostles and early Christians witnessing to Christ boldly in a world that does not receive them. They do so consistently, and creatively. Paul is our example. It is no wonder that Pope Benedict once had us reflect for a whole year on what we can learn from Paul. He does not withdraw, but engages with the culture in which he lives. In Athens, he seeks to find a way of connecting with what they already believe, so as to bring them to Christ. This was not totally successful, but he tried, and so must we. In this reading we see that in Corinth he proclaims Jesus to Jews and Gentiles.

One lesson we find is that Paul the Apostle worked in close collaboration with those heroic evangelizers, the lay couple Aquila and Priscilla. It is lay people who are on the front lines of evangelization, and it is the mission of the clergy to work together in seamless and fruitful harmony with them.

Paul also tried to find occasions to explain the faith: “Every Sabbath he used to hold debates in the synagogue, trying to convert Jews as well as Greeks. ... Paul devoted all of his time to preaching, declaring to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” We need to be engaged, using all of the gifts that God has given us to reach out to those around us who do not see, or see only dimly, what is clear to us because of the grace of God and the gift of faith. We need to recognize in those whom we encounter in the course of our mission as servants of the Risen and Ascended Lord, that they are, like us, children of God, and must always be treated with reverence, even if they are caught up in the culture of death. That, of course, must also be true of the way we treat one another: few things are more vile than the vitriol that is so often found burning through the debates of fervent disciples of Jesus: “Let strife among us be unknown, let all contention cease: be Christ’s the glory that we seek. Be ours, his holy peace.” In all this, we need to go where there is still darkness, to seek lovingly to bring the light of Christ.

A second point which the readings today offer to us is that frequently those whom we engage will not listen. Remember: Paul himself was a persecutor of Christ. And we ourselves so often do not listen to those around us, or to the word of God. That fact should produce in us humility and gentleness as we encounter those who oppose the Gospel. But opposition we will always face, for Jesus has not yet come again. We are citizens of the New Jerusalem, but for the moment living in Babylon the Great. So we hear how those to whom Paul spoke in Corinth turned against him and insulted him. That is what we experience each year during the March for Life, as we pass people screaming insults at us. What to do? First, we should realize that each of those insulting us is a brother and sister, and perhaps they have had some experience in their life that has brought them to the bitterness within them. So we should simply pray in our hearts for each and every one of them, and see in each of them the face of Paul before his conversion. Saying “I will pray for you” can be a condescending rhetorical trick; but that is not for us. We should simply, and actually, pray for each and every person whom we encounter in the journey of life, and not just today’s March for Life.

We should also remember a hopeful sign: those who propose abortion and euthanasia and other such evils are unwilling to call them by name. They feel the need to use euphemisms, to cloak the violent reality which they espouse. So abortion becomes termination of pregnancy, and lethal injection becomes medical assistance in dying. I say this is a hopeful sign, since it indicates the presence of a conscience which makes the proponents of these evils realize that they are advocating things which are, in fact, shameful. That is why they feel compelled to cloak the evil realities they espouse with false sweet words. That is at least the beginning of the way back to reality and truth. It is said that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue. If they felt no shame at abortion or lethal injection, they would not hesitate to use those words, which simply express accurately what is actually happening. But they cannot abide a clear description of what they propose as good. Perhaps the seeds of a future conversion of heart lie in this insistence on hiding reality.

This event is a pilgrimage, not a political rally. There are grim forces that lie behind those who advocate the horrible features of the culture of death, with whatever degree of personal culpability or lack of culpability - and that is not for any one of us to judge. Those forces are cosmic in origin and scope, and are profoundly entrenched in our society, influencing all of us.

As we meet those who espouse the culture of death, we should humbly recognize how frail we are, and how easily the massive social pressures of secularism can distort the understanding of anyone. As always, humility is our shield.

This conflict in which we are sent by Our Lord to engage, in this world, as his representatives, is not some superficial political contest, to be resolved by rallies or political operations. It is far deeper than that, and in fact when it comes to the human political calculations, the prospects are not bright. We do need to act wisely, with the natural wisdom God has given us, in our political strategies. But that wisdom, though necessary, and sometimes missing, is radically insufficient. The struggle in which we are engaged is a concrete and local manifestation of the cosmic battle between good and evil. Jesus is already victorious: the strife is o'er, the battle won. But we are called and sent to engage in the working out of his victory in this time and place.

So our inner disposition, and outward demeanour, must reflect our understanding that we are servants of the Lord Jesus, Christ the King: this is a pilgrimage, not a political rally. Only under the sign of Christ will ultimate victory be won. This struggle is far beyond mere human efforts. That is why I strongly urge that all of us walk prayerfully and in silence, or that we pray aloud, or sing songs of worship. Not for us the chants and slogans. Not for us the shouts and rants. Not for us the way of this world. We are servants of the Great King, and we need to act accordingly. Our silence will shout far more loudly than the screams of those whom we encounter on this day. We must not become what we reject. We must go deep, very deep, and (if I may refer to a book which we should all read) we must appreciate the power of silence. It is in our prayer, adoration, and silent witness that the grace of God, and not our flimsy efforts, will be made manifest. That is why it is profoundly right that we begin with the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. As is said in the eastern Christian liturgies: To you O Lord.

That is the final message of today's readings. It is summed up in a phrase used in the pontifical blessing which I will proclaim at the end of Mass: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Listen to today's psalm: "Sing a new song to the Lord for he has worked wonders. His right hand and his holy arm have brought salvation."

In the Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that although he is withdrawing, in his great act of trust in them, he always is with them, and in fidelity to him they will find joy in the midst of the suffering they will surely experience in this vale of tears: "In a short time you will no longer see me, and in a short time later you will see me again."

What does it mean? "You will be weeping and wailing while the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy."

Today we witness to the sanctity of life, and in the midst of an unbelieving and hostile world today we witness to Christ, our Risen Lord, ascended in majesty, Christ the King. He calls us and send us to be his trusted representatives: humbly, lovingly and silently proclaiming the God who is our hope and our salvation. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

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